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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 000411

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/18/2032

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KCUL SOCI CH

SUBJECT: CHINESE OFFICIAL POLLING: SURVEY SAYS, YOU'RE FIRED!

Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.

Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶11. (C) The Chinese Government at various levels is increasingly turning to opinion polling to measure public satisfaction with officials' performances and with provision of social services. The Ministry of Supervision (the Government analog to the Party's Central Discipline Inspection Commission or anti-corruption entity) is pushing localities to embrace a 2006 Central Organization Department regulation mandating that polling results figure in the annual assessments of local government operations, said Victor Yuan (protect), president of the Horizon public opinion firm. Although official polling aims to assess how efficiently and productively government departments operate rather than target individual leaders, the phenomenon of poor ratings resulting in the removal or early retirement of cadres at the city and county levels is becoming more widespread. Measuring the success of the Central Government's social programs is problematic and a quantifiable definition of the "harmonious society" concept remains elusive, Yuan said. An effort to set benchmarks of harmoniousness by the Beijing City Government ended in confusion and division. End Summary.

Polling Is Popular

¶12. (C) In a conversation with poloffs on January 17, Yuan related that the Central Organization Department mandated early last year that, starting in 2006, local governments are required to use public opinion polling results to help assess the performance of their various departments, such as local health and housing bureaus. The Ministry of Supervision is pushing the policy, urging cities and counties to develop useful surveys, Yuan said. The regulation specifies, however, that the results and method do not have to be open to the public. As a result, the demand for polling has soared, Yuan remarked, and many local Governments have developed online public opinion surveys (some 34 percent of county-level and above governments have web pages). Most observers agree, however, that the data gleaned from online questionnaires are suspect because there is little oversight, voting is not transparent and ballot-stuffing occurs regularly.

¶13. (C) The weight of polling results in the annual assessments has increased, Yuan said. The Central Government has launched many new initiatives in social realms in recent years, particularly in education, health care and the environment. The leadership is attempting to figure out a way to accurately measure and monitor the progress, while also gauging good governance. The phenomenon of poor ratings

resulting in the removal or early retirement of officials at the city and county levels is becoming more widespread, Yuan said. For example, in the Shunyi district of Beijing, the local government conducts annual surveys rating various departments. If a department finishes at the bottom in terms of public approval for three straight years, then its head is fired or demoted. At the same time, the heads of the top five departments must record a video for distribution among officials in which they share their words of wisdom.

¶4. (C) In a separate conversation, Wang Xixin (protect), Professor at Beijing University's Center for Public Participation Studies and Support, echoed Yuan's assessment of the newfound importance China's leadership places on public opinion. Chinese cadres focus more on public opinion than leaders of perhaps any other country in the world, Wang claimed. This attention is a direct reflection of the leadership's lack of confidence in its own legitimacy, he asserted. One example of sensitivity to public opinion, Wang said, was the recent decision not to raise train ticket prices during the 2007 Chinese New Year, due to public complaints about price gouging during China's annual holiday travel rush.

In Search of Impartiality

¶5. (C) The National Statistics Bureau (NSB) has established a National Public Polling Center (NPPC) to conduct and promote public opinion surveys. A prime function of the NPPC is to canvass Party members about their "basic thinking," Yuan remarked, although he said he has no information about the content or results of such inquiries. He specified that, as a general rule, official polling aims to assess how

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efficiently and productively government departments operate rather than target individual leaders. Nonetheless, Horizon has embarked on a three-year project that uses polling to assess the performance of 10 provincial governors. To build trust with officials and to smooth out any methodological kinks, Horizon will not publicly release any of the results the first year. But next year, Yuan plans to release the names of the governors whose provinces were surveyed as well as any positive findings. The year after that, Yuan intends to publicize all the information.

¶6. (C) Government offices often prefer to employ Horizon to conduct their polling rather than the NPPC, Yuan judged, because Horizon is viewed as more objective. NPPC is prone to influence from "stronger" ministries, such as the Ministry of Public Security or the Tax Bureau, and other officials, who have been known to convince the NPPC to doctor their results, Yuan related. (Note: One Embassy contact alleged that NPPC doctoring of unfavorable survey data for the Shanghai Government was one of the reasons for the recent sacking of NSB head Qiu Xiaohua, who has been detained on corruption charges. End note.) Horizon, as an independent organization, is less vulnerable to such influences and is more likely to paint an accurate picture of public opinion, even if the verdict is not entirely positive.

How Do You Quantify Harmoniousness?

¶7. (C) Provision of social security is the area where officials are most interested in seeking measurements of performance, particularly in terms of pensions, unemployment benefits, housing and medical care, Yuan said. Progress has been slow in all of these areas. Only two percent of the Chinese public is receiving support in all social security categories, and more than 50 percent get nothing. Such statistics cause concern about stability among leaders at all levels. Against this backdrop, Horizon has conducted no polling on how the leadership's harmonious society concept is being received. In Yuan's view, however, the harmonious

society slogan is failing to resonate, particularly among decisionmakers. A key criticism is that the concept is too vague, that a harmonious society, like the New Socialist Countryside, is difficult to define or quantify. Yuan related that in 2006 he participated in a meeting that Liu Qi, the Beijing Party Secretary, convened with scholars to discuss the harmonious society concept. The goal was to devise tangible measures so that the Government could set (and reach) objectives and claim success, making Beijing a national model of harmoniousness. Liu Qi and the other officials went away more confused than when they arrived. Yuan said participants could not reach agreement on any benchmarks.

¶8. (C) One particularly contentious issue centered around how the capital should treat its surging population of migrant workers. Some scholars urged Liu to make Beijing a more hospitable place for the mobile workforce and their families, expanding social services for them and removing some of the institutional barriers, such as residence permit requirements, that keep migrants in legal limbo. But other scholars warned against easing policies, arguing that longstanding Beijing citizens would react negatively to a more welcoming policy. People worry that an influx of poor newcomers will burden infrastructure and reduce quality of life. Schools that open their doors to migrant children often then hemorrhage regular resident children whose parents worry about a deterioration of academic standards. Neither scenario is a picture of harmoniousness, Yuan observed.

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